

Statement of Lt. Ali El Jaouhar, retired Military
for the Hearing on Africa, Global Human Rights and
International Operations Subcommittee.

Thursday, November 17, 2005

**Getting to “Yes”: Resolving the 30-year conflict over
the status of Western Sahara.**

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee, I am honored to be here today, and I appreciate the opportunity you have given me to speak before this great institution.

I am not a politician. I am not a diplomat. I am not a scholar. I was a soldier held by the Polisario Front for 23 years – until one year ago. I am here to tell you my story.

Today I live in a small village in Morocco.

From my house, I have a view of the Moroccan countryside, I can read Ernest Hemingway and I can sit in one of the greatest institutions created by man and speak with you.

For nearly half of my life, this was not possible.

I am free today. And I want to say thank you for the help that you, the American Congress, gave to help win our freedom.

Based on pressure, the last four hundred and four prisoners of war were released in August. Senator Richard Lugar traveled to Algeria to ensure their release. We are eternally grateful.

Until last year, I was a prisoner of war in southern Algeria. I was held prisoner along with twenty-four hundred Moroccan soldiers by the Polisario Front and Algeria.

In 1991, a ceasefire was put in place by the United Nations. We all should have been released at this time. But we remained prisoner for more than a decade after this.

Torture, deprivation and humiliation were routine during my twenty-three years. We were beaten, usually with a wire whip, nearly every day for anything that displeased our captors.

Some of my friends were tortured to death by whipping and others were left to die after being thrown in a hole and kept there without food or water.

My friend and fellow prisoner, Abderrahmane, who would sneak me stale bread, was not a strong man. One day, he was exhausted; he just could not continue the work the Polisario forced us to do as slave labor.

When he would not resume working, the Polisario guards poured gasoline all over his body, then lit him on fire. As we watched him go into flames, we all wanted to help him but knew the Polisario would do the same to us if we did.

Food and water was always scarce – barely enough to keep us alive. Most of the time, we were in rags and barefoot.

We were constantly ill from malnutrition and disease that was untreated.

When our enemy needed blood, we were forced, like milk cows, to give him our own blood.

Every building in the camps was built under the whip by forced labor from Moroccan prisoners of war.

The torture was horrible but the mental abuse was just as bad.

During my captivity by the Polisario and Algeria – my family did not know if I was alive or dead for many years. My wife died while I was in captivity, leaving our 11-year-old daughter orphaned.

The Polisario and Algeria refused to allow us to communicate with our families until 1994 – when they were forced by the International Red Cross. Thirteen years went by with no contact with my loved ones.

I could tell you more. I could tell you about the many ways that our officers were humiliated. I could describe to you, how after my Captain said something the Polisario did not like, my Captain and I were forced to crawl naked in front of our soldiers.

We were then put in a cell with our hands tied behind our backs for thirteen days. After that, we were isolated for nine months.

The Polisario forced us to load trucks full of international aid from Germany and the European Union. The Polisario drivers of the trucks told me it was being sold for profit in Mauritania. The Polisario steals international aid meant for the starving – with the money going to Polisario leaders.

When people ask me why we were treated as animals, I tell them that the Polisario did not believe they would ever be held accountable – they never thought they would have to pay for their crimes.

To this day, none of them have been held accountable – and are free to torture others. **Mr. Chairman, I ask you – shouldn't these people be held accountable?**

A just world would not support such murders and torturers.

Mr. Chairman, I want to tell you now that there are still TODAY thousands of people held hostage by the Polisario in camps in southern Algeria. I say they are hostages because they are not free to leave if they want to.

Your great President Ronald Reagan asked the Russians to take down the Berlin Wall. I hope that America will now ask the Polisario to open the doors to the camps in Algeria and let the hostages leave.

I call on you and the United States Congress to help spread its freedom to the rest of the world and make sure these people are set free. This problem needs to be solved once and for all.

Thank you for letting me speak before you today.